

FOR THE WANT OF A SHOE...

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What would have become of Cinderella without that glass slipper?

We all know her story. Stripped of her family position by a jealous stepmother, she is reduced to servitude in her own household, and denied the chance to better herself through a hoped-for advantageous marriage—until she is rescued from this fate-worse-than-death by a slew of helpful mice, and a magical old woman. This is the story that Walt Disney “faithfully” rendered for his 1947 American audience after taking its essence from an earlier French tale, crafting a fable fed to millions of little girls for three generations—that long-suffering loveliness will bring enchanted assistance and gain you a prince in the end. Or, in a more modern vernacular, wearing the right clothes—and shoes—will make all your dreams come true!

But, wait a minute. Is this the whole story?

One of the oldest-known fairy tales, the Cinderella story has over three hundred versions, found in cultures that span the globe. Its earliest written form comes to us from 9th century CE China, moving to the west from the east, and bringing with it the original motif of Cinderella’s impossibly small feet. Cultural differences aside, the one theme that all accounts have in common is an object that identifies Cinderella to her prince. Now, not every story wears a shoe—in some versions, it is a ring—but there is always an outside item imperative to Cinderella’s identity. Her prince doesn’t recognize her until “the shoe fits.”

Shoes stride through every landscape. Shoes need only defend our feet from the elements, yet we have fashioned them as both useful and beautiful objects. Created to offer security, they have come—on some level—to declare our identity to the world around us. I asked a friend—a self-proclaimed shoe person—to describe what shoes represent. Her response? “A conspicuous consumption.” Individuality insulated from utility, shoes can elevate the sophisticated, ground the sensible, and offer an assessment of our self-identity with a single

glance.

Virtually scattering sunlight as she swayed unsteadily amongst the cars, her garish goldfinch-yellow, towering platform pumps carried her precariously across the Target parking lot. Watching her teeter atop such lofty heights, she and her shoes arrested my attention, encumbering my own comfort with recollections of ancient Chinese foot-binding practices.

A practice that lasted for over a millennia—reaching into the middle of the 20th century—the creation of these “Golden Lotus feet” involved the crushing, compacting and binding of little girls’ feet, to induce the tiny feet and delicate mincing walk that ancient Chinese men found so erotic in their brides. The best of these flower-like feet spanned three to four inches, with all over six found failing. Mothers and grandmothers, hopeful of advantageous matches, willingly tortured their little girls into presenting—as John King Fairbank put it—“an alluring symbol of chastity and male ownership,” as a desirable wife. When anticipative parents attempted to arrange a marriage, they presented the potential groom a pair of diminutive shoes, to substantiate the small size of their daughter’s feet. Yet due to their contrived condition, these daughters became virtual prisoners in their husbands’ homes, their beautiful shoes the symbol of their custody.

These infinitely desirable creatures also spent the rest of their lives painfully following another ritual practice, the nightly unbinding, washing, folding, perfuming and rebinding of their anguished feet—now so foul that a woman never allowed her husband to see her feet unbound.

Just how disparate—all these centuries later—were the feet of the young woman I observed from those of Ming Dynasty brides? Bearing a legacy of pain, just to fit a beautiful pair of shoes.

Even in the days since this traditional Chinese practice was finally outlawed, shoes have remained a “bone of contention” between mothers and daughters everywhere. Daughters have long tottered down the hall in their mother’s best heels, and mothers have battled buying heels for those same daughters, fearing they will grow up too fast.

My first pair still sings siren-like in recollection. Calling out to something deep within me, those robin’s egg blue pumps seemed to wing straight to my outstretched hands, and my pre-teen self hoisted them like a long-sought prize.

“Mom... look! They’re perfect. Can I try them?”

“Keep looking,” she said, sending a speedy squint in my direction. “The heels are too high.”

Fully-equipped to shoot me down, she was finally forced to acquiesce when my choice alone was found to fit.

Like a first signpost on the road to maturity, the shimmering shoes clutched tight in my arms offered me direction, and I was content. My mother, not so impatient to begin the journey, was much less so.

Those shoes carried a crucial key to my developing identity—just as they did for Cinderella.

Cinderella’s glass slippers have long been the subject of academic debate. Held by some scholars as initially envisioned in fur, the “French version” slippers—through an 18th century translation error—transformed instead to the glass we now find so familiar. Regardless of intent, there is something almost mystical about the idea of a glass shoe, a certain purity and fragility not found in any other material. Glass refracts and reflects light; it forms windows and mirrors, allowing us to see through to the other side, and yet also to look back at ourselves. It is brittle and delicate, yet born in the heat of a fire so hot that it can melt rock. Cinderella’s glass slippers were not “one size fits all,” but stood instead as “that which only fits one.” Made for her alone—carrying her sole reflection within their tiny forms—they turned out to be a surreptitious symbol of her identity, a likeness that could mirror no other.

Even so, Cinderella’s slippers weren’t the only fairy tale shoes which pirouette into view as an arbiter of fate. Hans Christian Andersen’s classic account of *The Red Shoes* paints a portrait of a young girl—Karen—who becomes literally possessed by a pair of red shoes. Like Dorothy, whose ruby slippers made her the prey of the Wicked Witch of the West, so Karen also became a victim of her shoes. At first delighted by their beauty, and what she sees as the envy of others, she wears them to a ball, neglecting her family duties. Yet once she begins to dance, the shoes take on a life of their own, and she cannot stop. Dancing her out into the forest, the shoes refuse to stop even when her feet are torn and bloodied. The price of their ownership requires first her feet, and then her life—the red shoes would not stop dancing even after she begs the town executioner to chop off her feet. Written as a morality tale on the “wages of sin,” Andersen’s red shoes resonate with reminders that through our choices, we identify ourselves.

Like Karen, I too have gazed in a disbelieving-awe at a pair of red peep-toe pumps; this crimson sample from a friend's substantial shoe collection was stacked with the rest like cordwood at the top of her walk-in closet. Neatly organized in boxes labeled by color, heel height, and brief description, her shoes relocated some years later to clear plastic packaging so they could speak for themselves. She was undoubtedly well equipped for any imaginable occasion. Nevertheless, it did give me pause. Just how many pairs of shoes does one need to feel prepared for life?

There is a sense of scornful fascination in television's "every-woman" adaptation of the Cinderella story: "What Not to Wear." Unsuspecting women, deemed full-fledged fashion disasters, find themselves ambushed by family and friends who have nominated them for a nationally televised makeover. Verbally poked and prodded by a fairy godmother-like duo, they are treated to a series of humiliations on their path to a refurbished self-image. Told that, in spite of intelligence, ability and character, they will never amount to anything if they don't "look the part," these women surrender to derision, a set of newfangled "rules" to dress-for-success, and voiceless makeovers—all in a search for their "happily ever after" of beauty and self-worth. In episodes freely fraught with despair, these mortified women are further obliged to go shoe shopping, spending outrageous sums of money on shoes they seldom seem to want. Yet, there in the valley of decision—with one foot in the new and one in the old—they appear to teeter on a threshold of transformation. It is as if the shoes themselves are the harbinger of a new identity.

Cinderella—near the end of her story—stood in a similar valley of decision. When the prince—supplied with just a small translucent shoe—at last came to her door in pursuit of his sought-after bride, she had a decision to make. Would she stand up for herself, or let her step-family take from her the one thing she wanted most—the return of her true identity? In yet another of those comprehensive accounts, the Grimm brothers tell Cinderella's story with an unfamiliar twist: in the face of a family hell-bent on stealing both her identity and her chance for a happy life, this Cinderella doesn't weep, helpless in the face of her misfortune. She is not reliant on relief from magical mice or a fairy godmother. She bides her time, awaiting her future with wisdom. And when it arrives, she stakes her claim for the shoe.

Because she knows, the shoe fits.